

IN THE CLAIMS:

1. (Original) An apparatus for stacking sheets from a starwheel assembly comprising:

A₁ a barrier located at least partially within the starwheel assembly to discharge the sheets from the starwheel assembly;

a first separator finger movable from a retracted position with respect to the sheets within the starwheel assembly to an extended position between first and second adjacent sheets within the starwheel assembly, the first separator finger movable to support the first sheet to begin a first stack upon the first separator finger and to separate the first sheet from the second sheet completing another stack; and

a second separator finger movable independently of the first separator finger.

2. (Original) The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising:

a first actuator coupled to the first separator finger, the first actuator actuatable to move the first separator finger; and

a second actuator coupled to the second separator finger, the second actuator actuatable to move the second separator finger;

wherein the first and second actuators are controllable independently of one another to move the first and second separator fingers independently of one another.

3. (Currently amended) The apparatus of claim 2, further comprising a third actuator coupled to the first separator finger, the third actuator actuatable to move the first separator finger in a direction different from the direction the first actuator moves the first separator finger, the first separator finger movable by actuation of the first and third actuators.

4. (Original) The apparatus of claim 3, wherein the first and third actuators are independently controllable to move the first separator finger.

5. (Original) The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the barrier is radially aligned with the starwheel assembly.

6. (Original) The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the first separator finger projects in a direction substantially perpendicular to the barrier.

7. (Original) The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the starwheel rotates in a direction, the first separator finger being movable opposite to the direction of rotation of the starwheel assembly.

A, 8. (Original) The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the first separator finger is movable within a cylindrical volume defined by a periphery of the starwheel assembly.

9. (Original) The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the first separator finger is movable outside a cylindrical volume defined by a periphery of the starwheel assembly.

10. (Currently amended) The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the barrier is coupled to the first ~~separation~~ separator finger.

11. (Original) The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the second separator finger is movable toward the starwheel assembly to receive the first stack from the first separator finger.

12. (Original) The apparatus of claim 11, wherein the second separator finger is movable away from the starwheel assembly to accommodate additional discharged sheets on the first stack.

13. (Original) The apparatus of claim 12, wherein the first separator finger is movable to an extended position between third and fourth adjacent sheets within the starwheel assembly, the first separator finger movable to support the third sheet to begin a second stack upon the first separator finger and to separate the third sheet from the fourth sheet completing the first stack.

14. (Original) The apparatus of claim 13, further comprising a conveyor positioned to receive the first stack, the conveyor movable to carry the first stack away from the starwheel assembly.

15. (Original) The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the first separator finger is movable radially away from the starwheel assembly to accommodate additional discharged sheets on the first stack.

A, 16. (Original) The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the second separator finger is movable from a retracted position with respect to the sheets within the starwheel assembly to an extended position between third and fourth adjacent sheets within the starwheel assembly, the second separator finger movable to support the third sheet to begin a second stack upon the second separator finger and to separate the third sheet from the fourth sheet completing the first stack on the first separator finger.

17. (Original) The apparatus of claim 16, further comprising a conveyor positioned to receive the first stack from the first separator finger, the conveyor movable to carry the first stack away from the starwheel assembly.

18. (Original) The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the second separator finger is movable radially away from the starwheel assembly to accommodate additional discharged sheets on the second stack.

19. (Original) The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the conveyer is positioned to receive the second stack from the second separator finger and to carry the second stack away from the starwheel assembly.

20. (Original) A method for stacking sheets from a starwheel assembly rotated about an axis, the method comprising:

feeding sheets to the starwheel assembly;

discharging sheets from the starwheel assembly with a barrier;

inserting a first separator finger between two adjacent sheets positioned within the starwheel assembly;

moving a second separator finger independently of the first separator finger; and

supporting a first sheet of the two adjacent sheets with the first separator finger, the first sheet beginning a first stack and a second sheet of the two adjacent sheets completing another stack.

A, 21. (Original) The method of claim 20, wherein inserting the first separator finger includes actuating a first actuator coupled to the first separator finger.

22. (Original) The method of claim 21, wherein:
inserting a first separator finger further includes actuating a second actuator coupled to the first separator finger; and
the first and second actuators are actuatable to move the first separator finger in different directions.

23. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein the first and second actuators are independently controllable.

24. (Original) The method of claim 20, further comprising moving the second separator finger toward the starwheel assembly to receive the first stack from the first separator finger.

25. (Original) The method of claim 24, further comprising:
moving the second separator finger and the first stack away from the starwheel assembly; and

supporting additional discharged sheets on the first stack after the second separator finger receives the first stack.

26. (Original) The method of claim 25, further comprising:
reinserting the first separator finger between a second set of two adjacent sheets positioned within the starwheel assembly; and

A₁ supporting a third sheet of the second set of two adjacent sheets with the first separator finger, the third sheet beginning a second stack, and a fourth sheet of the second set of two adjacent sheets completing the first stack on the second separator finger.

27. (Original) The method of claim 26, further comprising:
transferring the first stack from the second separator finger to a conveyor; and
moving the first stack on the conveyor away from the starwheel assembly.

28. (Original) The method of claim 20, further comprising:
moving the first separator finger and the first sheet radially away from the starwheel assembly; and
supporting additional discharged sheets on the first sheet as the first separator finger and the first sheet move radially away from the starwheel assembly.

29. (Original) The method of claim 28, further comprising:
inserting the second separator finger between a second set of two adjacent sheets positioned within the starwheel assembly; and
supporting a third sheet of the second set of two adjacent sheets with the second separator finger, the third sheet beginning the second stack, and a fourth sheet of the second set of two adjacent sheets completing the first stack on the first separator finger.

30. (Original) The method of claim 29, further comprising:
transferring the first stack from the first separator finger to a conveyor; and
moving the first stack on the conveyor away from the starwheel assembly.

31. (Original) The method of claim 30, wherein transferring the first stack from the first separator finger to the conveyor includes passing fingers of the first separator finger through the conveyor.

A₁ 32. (Original) The method of claim 30, wherein transferring the first stack from the first separator finger to the conveyor includes retracting fingers of the first separator finger behind the barrier.

33. (Original) The method of claim 30, further comprising:
moving the second separator finger radially away from the starwheel assembly;
and
supporting additional discharged sheets on the second stack after the second separator finger moves radially away from the starwheel assembly.

34. (Original) The method of claim 33, further comprising:
transferring the second stack from the second separator finger to a conveyor; and
moving the second stack on the conveyor away from the starwheel assembly.

~~35-80.~~ (Cancelled)

81. (Currently amended) A sheet stacking apparatus for stacking sheets from a starwheel assembly, the sheet stacking apparatus, comprising:

- a separator finger;
- a first actuator coupled to the separator finger, the first actuator actuatable to move the separator finger in a first direction; and
- a second actuator coupled to the separator finger, the second actuator actuatable to move the separator finger in a second direction;

the separator finger movable by at least one of the first and second actuators from a retracted position with respect to sheets within the starwheel assembly to an extended position between first and second adjacent sheets within the starwheel assembly, the separator finger movable to support the first sheet to begin a first stack upon the separator finger ~~first separator finger~~ and to separate the first sheet from the second sheet completing another stack.

82. (Original) The apparatus of claim 81, wherein the first and second actuators are independently controllable.

83. (Original) The apparatus of claim 81, wherein the first and second directions are substantially perpendicular to one another.

84. (Original) The apparatus of claim 81, wherein the first direction is substantially horizontal.

85. (Original) The apparatus of claim 81, wherein the first direction is substantially vertical.

86. (Original) The apparatus of claim 85, wherein the second direction is substantially horizontal.

87. (Original) The apparatus of claim 81, further comprising a controller coupled to the first and second actuators, the controller having associated programming defining a path in which the separator finger moves by actuation of the first and second actuators, wherein the programming can be changed to change the path of the separator finger.

88. (Original) A method of stacking sheets of product discharged from a starwheel, the method comprising:

actuating a first actuator coupled to a separator finger;

moving the separator in a first direction responsive to actuation of the first actuator;

actuating a second actuator coupled to the separator finger;

moving the separator finger in a second direction different from the first direction responsive to actuation of the second actuator; and

separating sheets in the starwheel by moving the separator finger in at least one of the first and second directions.

89. (Original) The method of claim 88, wherein at least part of moving the separator in a first direction and moving the separator in a second direction occurs substantially simultaneously.

90. (Original) The method of claim 88, wherein the first actuator is actuated independently of the second actuator.

91. (Original) The method of claim 88, wherein the first and second directions are substantially perpendicular to one another.

92. (Original) The method of claim 88, wherein the first direction is substantially horizontal.

93. (Original) The method of claim 88, wherein the first direction is substantially vertical.

94. (Original) The method of claim 93, wherein the second direction is substantially horizontal.

95. (Original) The method of claim 94, further comprising:
controlling at least one of the first and second actuators with a controller having programming at least partially defining a first path taken by the separator finger; and
changing the programming of the controller to at least partially define a second path taken by the separator different from the first path.

96-118. (Cancelled)
